

North Huron council pauses environmental assessment

Kelsey Dunbar

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A permit for the required work and the discovery of black redhorse sucker fish in the Maitland River – a species at risk identified by federal and provincial legislature – was the tipping point which has pressured North Huron council to put the environmental assessment of the Howson Dam on hold and get approval from the Ministry of Natural Resources and Forestry (MNRF) before proceeding.

“When you decided to go down the EA road it was because you wanted to consider options for this structure and so these are the options that have come to the top as a result of public comments and initial review,” North Huron CAO Sharon Chambers said at the Nov. 7 council meeting.

“If you are going to consider rehabilitation as a viable option you need to do this analysis.”

Following the project’s public meeting last month, project manager Jeff Graham said many of the 127 comments received expressed an interest in seeing the dam restored with water levels returned to historic levels.

Originally Graham presented five alternatives for the dam, however, after public discussion he believes there is only three alternatives moving forward: Rehabilitate the existing dam with the bridge, without the bridge, and remove the dam if rehabilitation isn’t practical, cost-effective or possible.

“It is our position that the bridge is part and parcel with the dam, it is built directly on top and it is really part of the dam structure,” Graham said.

“There is a good chance the stability of the dam is dependent on the weight of the bridge itself. So it is possible that the alternative of rehabilitating the dam might be affected by whether the bridge is there or not.”

In a report to council, director of public works Jeff Molenhuis said there are approval requirements through the MNRF through the Lakes and Rivers Improvement Act (LRIA) for the work required for rehabilitation of the dam.

Before submitting an application to LIRA, the hazard potential, in-flow design flood and safety analysis of the dam need to be completed and old figures show it could cost between \$60,000 and \$80,000.

Graham said he is unsure how the discovery of the threatened species will affect the LIRA process and “It is my understanding that there is legal protection (for the species) by way of this classification.”

Chambers said it would be a responsible approach to contact the MNRF because, “We want to make sure we don’t invest any of these funds before we find out about this (species at risk) because if we find that it is a deal breaker then we may need to stop this recommendation going forward.”

With these stipulations, Graham recommended a suspension of the environmental assessment to allow the LIRA analysis to proceed.

“As your consultant, it is really hard to really evaluate the cost and practicality of the rehabilitation of that dam until this work is done,” he said.

The CAO explained that at this point the results are unknown.

“We could spend that \$60 to \$80,000 and the MNR could come back and say ‘sorry,’ but if you really want to look at all your options and consider which of them are viable, it is a path you have to go down,” Chambers said.

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